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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 ISLAMABAD 002096

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SUBJECT: THE PAKISTANI LAWYERS 'LONG MARCH' BEGINS

REF: ISLAMABAD 2040

Classified By: Anne W. Patterson, Reasons 1.4 (b), (d)

¶1. (C) Summary: The much promised lawyers' Long March to protest for restoration of the deposed judiciary has begun its journey from Karachi through Lahore; officials expect hundreds of thousands of demonstrators will converge on Islamabad June 12 and 13. The march is a difficult challenge for Pakistan People's Party (PPP) leader Asif Zardari--a mass protest against his government by his natural constituency and an event which splits the coalition. Although organized by lawyers and civil society groups, Nawaz Sharif will now join the march and has encouraged his party and all Pakistanis to join as their national duty. The PPP has told its workers not to participate, but also is trying to co-opt the event in the name of support for an independent judiciary.

¶2. (C) The march is designed to put pressure on Zardari to restore former Chief Justice Chaudhry and thus lead to Musharraf's ouster. Zardari instead has been pushing restoration of the judges, except Chaudhry, through constitutional reform, but as his popularity plummets, the march may push him closer to Nawaz's position. Negative press forced Zardari to retract the orders of the Ministry of Interior to erect barricades to prevent the marchers from reaching the Supreme Court and parliament buildings. Security officials remain concerned about another suicide bombing and/or an inevitable clash between police and demonstrators in Islamabad's 100 plus degree heat. End Summary.

Long March

¶3. (SBU) For months, the Pakistani lawyers movement has been threatening a "long march" to protest the inability of the coalition government to restore the judges deposed by President Musharraf in November 2007. As a group, they have been critical as well of the Pakistan People's Party's (PPP) proposed package of constitutional amendments (Ref A) that would impose new age and jurisdictional restrictions on the Supreme Court justices. Supported by various civil society organizations, the lawyers began their march June 9 in Sindh and Balochistan provinces. They have added a theme of supporting Musharraf's ouster. The event has been organized by prominent attorneys, including current and former Supreme Court Bar Association presidents Aitzaz Ahsan and Munir Malik.

¶4. (SBU) From Karachi, the "marchers" made their way (some by car and some by plane) to the Punjab city of Multan where they were addressed by deposed Chief Justice Iftikhar

Chaudhry on June 11. Behind bullet-proof glass, Chaudhry called for his supporters to continue their struggle for an independent judiciary and the full restoration of the deposed judges. Amid a sea of cheering supporters, Chaudhry, along with other prominent lawyers and an ever-growing number of supporters, left Multan for Lahore, where the local bar association is organizing a dinner June 11 for 5,000. Both organizers and the Ministry of Interior expect a crowd of several hundred thousand in Islamabad. Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N) leadership is claiming that they can recruit over 100,000 supporters in Rawalpindi alone, and the marchers from Lahore plan to converge with the marchers from Peshawar and Abbottabad upon reaching the parade grounds in Rawalpindi. They will then move on to Islamabad, where Aitzaz Ahsan announced the demonstrators will target the parliament.

15. (C) The PPP has told its party workers not to participate in the march, and PPP contacts are playing down the importance of an event that will directly play into Nawaz Sharif's "go Musharraf go/restore the judiciary" campaign. PPP official Sheikh Mansour told Poloff June 10 that the majority of the country was "more concerned with where they would get its next meal, not restoration of the judiciary," so the PPP intended to stay focused on passing the federal budget before tackling the lingering judiciary matter. Prime Minister Gilani, Law Minister Naek, and Interior Minister Malik all pressed the PML-N not to participate saying the demonstration should be left to the lawyers alone. Nevertheless, in an attempt to co-opt the event, Zardari has ordered the PPP to welcome the marchers with food and drinks

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and offers of consultations with parliamentarians.

16. (C) In contrast, the PML-N has been encouraging its workers to join to increase the pressure on both the PPP and Musharraf. In a press conference from Islamabad June 11, Nawaz Sharif termed the march "a battle for Pakistan's solidarity and survival" and called on all Pakistanis to participate peacefully as their national duty and promised to himself join on June 12. Shahbaz Sharif, the new Chief Minister of Punjab and brother to Nawaz, has agreed not to join the march because it would imply Punjab government support.

To Block or Not to Block

17. (C) With the recent bombing of the Danish Embassy and another foiled suicide bombing attempt looming large, Interior Minister Malik was preparing for the marchers by beefing up security forces around the government buildings and blocking roads and parade grounds. He told Ambassador June 10 that he would not allow the marchers to reach the gates of the Supreme Court, parliament or the diplomatic enclave. After Aitzaz Ahsan condemned the blockades and accused Zardari of breaking his promise to allow freedom of movement by the lawyers, however, Malik was forced to remove the barricades. The GOP has declared a local holiday June 12 and 13 for government workers to reduce the number of people on the streets.

18. (C) Comment: A mass protest that splits the coalition by what is the PPP's natural constituency is a difficult scenario that Zardari has been trying to avoid. If nothing else, the march will elicit media coverage that further pressures Zardari to compromise on the restoration of the former Chief Justice, a move that Nawaz believes will lead to Musharraf's ouster. Zardari's popularity has been plummeting as Nawaz's stock rises with his continued simple "go Musharraf go" message. As the leading partner in government, the PPP also faces the specter of a suicide bombing targeted at demonstrators and/or an inevitable clash between demonstrators and police in 100 plus degree weather.

19. (SBU) The Embassy will remain open June 12 and 13, but with reduced staffing for local employees.
PATTERSON